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The author, the text, and the (post)critic: notes on the encounter between postcritique and postcolonial criticism

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ABSTRACT

The article confronts postcolonial criticism with postcritique, a proposal by Rita Felski for a hermeneutic strategy aiming to overcome the limits of critique. Because of its self-reflexivity, its liaison with poststructuralism, and the societal categories it mobilizes, postcritics often see postcolonial criticism as a quintessential example of critique. However, postcolonial authors share similar concerns as postcritics, particularly when warning against any hasty conflation between intellectual work and political commitment. This article argues that the postcritical understanding of critique eschews the connection between critique and the realm of culture, thereby running the risk of doing away with context altogether. In order to account for the frameworks or contexts in which cultural objects are produced, without falling into some of the pitfalls of critique that postcritique aims to counter, the article proposes to look at the figure of the author as a bridge between the individual and the collective, as Edward Said suggests. The article closes with an analysis of several (critical and postcritical) readings of J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* to provide an example of how authorship can enter the interpretive scene through the figure of 'late style'.

KEYWORDS

Postcritique; postcolonial criticism; Felski; Coetzee; Said

Introduction

There seems to be a promise of ambiguity inherent to the prefix 'post'. The questions it raises in postcolonial criticism are familiar: how can we be past something that keeps reverberating? And, if 'post' points at an enduring phenomenon, then why do we retain a sense of conclusion? Similar questions can apply to a recent proposal for an alternative hermeneutics hinging on the same prefix: postcritique. Initiated by literary scholar Rita Felski, postcritique aims to rethink interpretation beyond the injunctions of critique.¹ It rejects all hermeneutics based on suspicion, in the wake of previous discontents within literary studies and the social sciences, and proposes a less sceptical approach to texts. While aiming to move beyond critique, Felski intends not to 'criticise critique', as it were, but to reassess and to rethink it in view of a renewed literary criticism

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that does not resort to ready-made frameworks of analysis. The ‘post’ of postcritique is thus no less ambiguous than the ‘post’ of postcolonialism.

It is perhaps ironic to look for a shared terrain between postcritique, a hermeneutics that seems to be trying to move away from context,² and postcolonial criticism, one shedding light on the obdurate workings of colonialism in culture, thus emphasizing context. But, in many respects, the postcritical project resonates with postcolonial criticism. They both warn, for instance, against an all too easy equation of academic criticism with political and social engagement, and, perhaps more importantly, they both are embedded in literary studies while aiming to address issues beyond their field. In fact, there seems to be a tension between critique within the field of literature and critique as a broader intellectual operation – that is, between the critic and the intellectual (two terms that are often used as synonyms).³ This article wants to confront postcolonial criticism and postcritique on the ground of literature: this is not so much a redrawing of disciplinary boundaries as a matter of what questions the study of literature elicits. What is exactly that object – critique – that postcritique puts into question? And how does it connect to the broader realm of culture?

This article argues that postcolonial criticism can supplement postcritique when the latter fails to account for the workings of culture. In order to reinstate the latter without resorting to the predetermined and oft-tired frameworks that postcritique (correctly) cautions against, I suggest attending to the figure of the author. As Edward Said has convincingly argued, the author can function as a bridge between the circumstances in which a cultural object is produced and the individual will or biographical facts of the producer. This suggestion is put to test through the analysis of Coetzee’s *The Childhood of Jesus*, a novel amply discussed by postcolonial critics and postcritics alike. Following some existing interpretations, I propose to understand this novel as an instance of the author’s ‘late style’. Such a reading accounts for the aesthetic and stylistic elements of the text without dismissing either the broader context in which it is embedded or the imprint of Coetzee-the-author.

Between postcritique and postcolonial criticism

Postcritique, a proposal for a novel engagement with texts, has been recently developed by Rita Felski, author of *The Limits of Critique* (2015) and co-editor, together with Elizabeth S. Anker, of *Critique and Postcritique* (2017).⁴ Felski joins other voices from within literary studies expressing their discontent with the theories (or ‘Theory’) derived from the three ‘masters of suspicion’ – Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud – and their twentieth-century successors.⁵ For Felski, hermeneutic strategies such as ideology critique, discourse analysis, symptomatic reading, and deconstruction share, despite their differences, a few features:

a spirit of sceptical questioning or outright condemnation, an emphasis on [...] oppressive social forces, the claim to be engaged in some kind of radical intellectual and/or political work, and the assumption that whatever is *not* critical must therefore be *uncritical*.⁶

These features, in Felski’s view, are what we have come to recognize as ‘critique’. The latter corresponds to a philosophical stance and interpretive attitude aimed at demystifying or disputing “‘common sense,” such that the reader is schooled to become suspicious

of whatever is identified as natural and taken for granted'.⁷ Against the 'nay-saying', 'fault-finding', and 'suspiciousness' of critique, postcritique aims to recover a more affirmative and less sceptical mode of reading. A postcritical approach, for Felski, is attentive to the affective dimension of texts; it is able to account for such everyday feelings experienced by the reader as enchantment and shock, usually deemed naive by critique; and it conceives of interpretation as the result of the work of several (human and non-human) actors instead of an accomplishment by the critic alone.⁸

Felski's postcritical project is deeply indebted to both queer literary scholar Eve K. Sedgwick and sociologist of science Bruno Latour.⁹ In 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading' (2003), Sedgwick makes the case for her discontent with the philosophies of suspicion, which have led to a negative mode of reading she calls 'paranoid'.¹⁰ As an alternative, Sedgwick proposes a 'reparative' reading: an interpretive position that allows the critic to be open to what is new and unexpected. Felski borrows Sedgwick's analysis of the negativity of suspicious readings, yet prefers not to use the terminology of paranoia in order not to fall back into the (Freudian) diagnostic style she is committed to counter.¹¹ Latour, on the other hand, famously argued in 2004 that 'critique has run out of steam'.¹² In his view, critique has pushed its self-appointed mission to demystify so far that it not only undermines hard-won evidence, it also risks siding with conspiracy theories. As a solution, Latour puts forward what he calls 'actor-network theory' (ANT): a social scientific approach in favour of a closer look at the associations contingently drawn by actors that rejects all explanations based on predetermined frameworks. 'The frame, or the context', says Latour, 'is precisely the sum of factors that make no difference to the data. [...] I would abstain from frameworks altogether. Just describe the state of affairs at hand'.¹³ Felski translates Latour's ANT within the field of literary studies: she shares his view that 'the social [...] is not a preformed being but a doing',¹⁴ and instead of reducing narratives to historical-political frameworks ('Context Stinks!', the title of one chapter of her book announces), she suggests looking at the networks formed by the many agencies involved in the interpretive scene.

While postcritique does reject all forms of reading based on ready-made frameworks – what we, with Joseph North, may call the 'historical/contextualist paradigm'¹⁵ – it does not dismiss the political engagement of literary criticism per se, nor does it misrecognize the emancipatory force of critique. Borrowing from Nancy Fraser, Felski acknowledges the "'partisan [...] identification" [of critical theory] with oppositional social movements'.¹⁶ This identification, she argues, has led to the conviction that critical reading is immediately political, regardless of the gap between intellectual work and politics, or of the mechanisms of translation between academe and activism.¹⁷ Far from simply dismissing critique, Felski's project underscores the self-referential character of a critical jargon that is increasingly disconnected from the social constituencies from which it stemmed. This concern is not entirely dissimilar to Gayatri C. Spivak's discontent with Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault as voiced in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988).¹⁸ When the two French philosophers state that representation no longer exists, argues Spivak, they portray the subaltern as a subject who can (politically) represent themselves. But, in doing so, they (aesthetically) represent both the subaltern's desires and interests as coinciding, and their own relation with marginal groups as transparent. She thus resorts to deconstruction as a reading strategy capable of accounting for the critics' role vis-à-vis the social constituencies they ventriloquize.

Deconstruction, however, is not the strategy pursued by postcritique. When arguing against all forms of suspiciousness, Felski detects two modalities of critique: one that ‘digs down’ into a text, in order to bring to surface what is hidden (as in traditional Marxist and Freudian analyses), and one that ‘stands back’ from a text, viewing it from afar (as in poststructuralism). This last modality, for her, liaises with such politicized fields as queer, feminist, and postcolonial studies.¹⁹ Anker, co-editor of *Critique and Postcritique*, specifies the status of deconstruction and of postcolonial criticism further. She frames the former as a hermeneutics that ‘inherit[s] and emulate[s] the logic of critique’.²⁰ By focusing on radical otherness and untranslatability, deconstruction, for Anker, leads not just to political inaction but to political inaction disguised as radicalism. An eminent example, in her view, is Spivak’s work, which promotes a reading strategy based on an irretrievable, ‘foreclosed’ otherness. Anker argues that Spivak retreats from actual political commitment into an inexhaustible process of self-reflexivity, that is, into a constant critique of one’s own position and privileges.

It may be true that self-critique sometimes becomes an inward-looking practice that morphs into a list of one’s own privileges at best, or an attempt to instil shame and guilt in the reader at worst. Yet, this hardly coincides with Spivak’s project for literary studies, let alone with postcolonial criticism *tout court*. While deconstruction, for Spivak, ‘has its historical case in postcoloniality’,²¹ it does not follow that postcolonial criticism and deconstruction are one and the same thing. Deconstruction appears to be a useful strategy for Spivak in that it carves a less dangerous space for the subaltern who resists both assimilation on the part of the benevolent European critic and all invocation of authenticity. But, this is only one side of her project: the postcolonial literary critics, Spivak argues, also needs to integrate insights from such disciplines as area studies and anthropology in their analysis, or to be proficient in languages of the global South to move beyond the Western canon.²² Certain postcolonial readings may as well be confined to the staging of otherness and to an unending reflexivity, as Anker suggests, but this has to do with a logic that seems not to be inherent to Spivak’s protocols for a postcolonial criticism.

Interestingly, Deleuze is not a target of postcritics, who often deploy his insights about positive affects and the workings of imagination.²³ Foucault and his acolytes, on the other hand, are amply chastised, for they are purported to be caught in the ‘standing back’ dynamic typical of critique.²⁴ However, postcritique is indebted to Foucault, even though largely implicitly, when it comes to its understanding of critique.²⁵ In fact, Felski insists that critique is a ‘matter of style, method, and orientation’, a ‘mood’, ‘a certain attitude or disposition’, if not the very ‘genre’ of modernity.²⁶ At the same time, she conceives of critique as a philosophy promoted all the way from Descartes and Kant to the philosophers of suspicion and their intellectual offspring. ‘Before Ricoeur’s triad of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche’, says Felski,

there was Descartes, with his enshrining of doubt as a philosophical method, as well as Kant, with his famous injunction ‘Sapere aude’ – dare to know – where a stance of critical questioning and self-questioning is hailed as the means by which humanity will free itself from its self-incurred tutelage.²⁷

Both accounts of critique – what we may call critique-as-attitude and critique-as-philosophy – are modelled on Foucault’s understanding of his own thinking as rooted in the

Enlightenment. The latter, for him, is first and foremost ‘an attitude [or] philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era’.²⁸ The Kantian motto *sapere aude*, in his view, designates the act of courage through which the modern individual reactivates the Enlightenment and embraces it as a tool of self-transformation.²⁹

This portrait of critique is surely correct, but it does not tell the full story about a tradition that inevitably extends beyond matters of style, attitude, or ‘ethos’ on the one hand, and of philosophical legacies on the other. Felski’s depiction of critique, in other words, is located either ‘down here’, in the act of reading, or ‘up there’, in the work of philosophers, but not in the activity itself of the one who practises critique – that is, the professional critic. An exploration of the notion of culture as the critic’s realm of intervention will show the importance of taking ‘frames’ and ‘contexts’ into account, *pace* Latour. This will allow us to move the focus onto the author (their ‘late style’ in particular) as the figure through which culture irreducibly materializes.

Culture and critique

That ‘critic’ and ‘intellectual’ are often used as synonyms does not strike the English speaker. This truism is exactly what postcritique aims to challenge. Can the figure of the critic/intellectual be decoupled from the practice of criticism? In other words, are intellectuals bound to be critics? Although postcritique does not specifically address these questions, the different attitude it prescribes when reading a text hints at a possible answer. In fact, in order to become a ‘postcritic’ one has to move beyond the nay-saying of critique and ‘striv[e] for a greater receptivity to the multifarious and many-shaded moods of texts’.³⁰ But, while assertions of moods or attitudes can fairly describe critique and postcritique as philosophical ‘ethoi’, they largely fail to capture the work of the critic.

Michael Warner, who prefigures Felski’s animus towards critique *avant la lettre*,³¹ argues that the latter has little to do with judgements of value. ‘Professionalized literary criticism’, he writes, ‘has for the most part given up the business of taste-making; that has been turned over to unprofessionalized book reviewers’.³² ‘Nay-saying’ and ‘yay-saying’, in other words, do not tell us much about professional criticism. Additionally, Warner reminds us that the distinction between critique and criticism is coincidental: ‘Kant’s English translators used the French word *critique* to translate the German *kritik*, thus creating a difference within English between *criticism* and *critique*’.³³ The variety of meanings of the word is also underscored by Raymond Williams, who provides at least three definitions of *kritik*: ‘Although its predominant general sense is of fault-finding, it has an underlying sense of judgement and a very confusing specialized sense, in relation to art and literature’.³⁴ This last, ‘very confusing’ sense is what remains marginal in Felski’s account, for she extensively portrays critique in terms of negative judgement and fault-finding but does not expand on its relation to art and literature – perhaps because of the seeming self-evidence of it.

Williams’s quote continues: ‘While criticism in the most general sense developed towards *censure* [...], criticism in its specialized sense developed towards *taste*, *cultivation*, and later *culture*’.³⁵ Here, Williams highlights the connection between the domain of culture and critique as related to art and literature. Culture itself is a complex term ranging from the anthropological to literary and artistic usage. Said

famously defines it, on the one hand, as the realm of aesthetic objects oriented to pleasure and ‘relatively autonomous’ vis-à-vis politics, economy and society (something that other postcolonial critics such as Stuart Hall have stressed as well)³⁶ and, on the other hand, as ‘a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society’s reservoir of the best that has been known and thought’.³⁷ Williams’s threefold definition of culture is not dissimilar:

(i) The independent and abstract noun which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development [...]; (ii) the independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general [...]; (iii) the independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity.³⁸

Culture, as both Williams and Said suggest, designates not just the particular way of life of demarcated social groups (ii) but also the aesthetic production of a society (iii), serving the goal to elevate the individual (i).

In *Culture and Society* (1958), Williams provides a history of culture beyond the lexical entry. The very idea of culture, for him, emerged in response to the industrial revolution and the political, economic, and social changes it brought about. Culture, in this alternative account, is a separate domain of intellectual and moral activities functioning ‘as a court of human appeal [...] over the processes of practical social judgement and [...] as a mitigating and rallying alternative’ to modern society.³⁹ Elaborating on Williams’s insight, Bruce Robbins understands culture as comprising a set of objects capable of elevating the individual and offering an escape from the pace of industrialization, the promises of positivism, and the imperative of progress. Within such a project, literature occupies an eminent place for him: ‘It was precisely because literature was not central to society or representative of its dominant trends that it could serve as a condensation and epitome of culture, “an abstraction and absolute”, against which society would be judged’.⁴⁰ Thus, Robbins concludes, Williams’s historical intuition ‘produces a concept of “culture” that is “critical” – set against social actuality – by its very definition’.⁴¹

One important implication of Robbins’s argument is that culture and critique are, to some degree, coextensive. Critique is configured not just as a philosophical ‘ethos’ but also as a historical event in response to the process of modernization. If postcritique is seriously committed to reconfiguring critique without caricaturizing it, and if critique itself is defined by its particular engagement with the domain of culture (one that emerged as a reaction against modernity and industrialization), then a postcritical approach should also offer a novel take on culture.

To be sure, Felski is not silent on the subject. Culture, for her, designates both ‘nurture’ – in this sense, it serves her (and Latour’s) polemics against social constructivism⁴² – and, perhaps more interestingly, a tool to defend the humanities in today’s bleak times for the field.⁴³ One problem of critique, for her, is that its opposition to people’s everyday experience widens the gap between intellectual life and non-academic publics. By recovering forms of reading held to be uncritical or naive, postcritique aims to strengthen the bond between these two audiences. As Anker and Felski contend,

[w]e can no longer assume that a stance of negativity and opposition is sufficient to justify the aesthetic or social importance of literature or our practice as critics. Rather, we are in urgent need of more powerful and persuasive justifications.⁴⁴

Postcritique thus promotes ways to engage with intellectual and artistic practices beyond critique; but, why should one engage with these practices in the first place? Let me be clear: this question – to which Felski suggests no answer – is neither an exercise in anti-intellectualism nor a way to downplay the problem of how to make a better case for the humanities. What it does point out is that a postcritical approach aimed at changing the critic's attitude and producing an alternative literary theory misses the opportunity to question the status of culture, of which critique is part and parcel, as Robbins has shown.

However, it is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on a definition of culture suited to the postcritical project.⁴⁵ What I would like to retain is a sense that the domain of culture, and, more generally, the context in which critique takes place, cannot be easily dismissed. Robbins himself, while reflecting on the postcritical fascination for aesthetics and science, concludes that the common feature between these two apparently irreconcilable fields is a tendency towards universalism. For both science and aesthetics, 'context is not significant. What the postcritique people seem to be trying to get away from, in other words, is not critique but context'.⁴⁶ Robbins's point is clear: without a focus on context, the postcritical project might fall, more or less unwillingly, into a renewed form of universalism. This is something that a post-colonial criticism willing to meet postcritique halfway cannot embrace. Yet, the reasons why postcritique rejects the historical-contextualist paradigm that is largely dominant in the field of literary and cultural studies remain valid. Critique, with its appeal to predetermined analytical frameworks and mannerist self-critique, particularly in the case of postcolonial criticism, has 'run out of steam' to some extent. How can we take these concerns into account without overlooking the domain of culture altogether or pretending that there are no frames and contexts in which cultural objects are produced and circulated? The next section argues that a focus on the author, following Said's theorization, can help to bridge the gap between a postcritical approach committed to recover the aesthetic, affective, and everyday dimensions of a text, and those other approaches, such as postcolonial criticism, that hold frameworks and contexts in high regard.

The author, or meeting postcritique halfway

At the end of the 1960s, some eminent poststructuralist philosophers declared the author to be dead – and that a few authors are known for the demise of the author is perhaps the first irony of this claim. In his influential 1967 essay 'The Death of the Author', Roland Barthes argues that the reader can only be freed by removing the author from the interpretive scene. When the removal happens, interpretation is no longer constrained by such functions of authorship as their biography, intentions and mastery over a text, and meaning can finally proliferate. Only this way, Barthes argues, does a text become 'a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings [*des écritures variées*], none of them original, blend and clash'.⁴⁷ Felski moves two objections, if only in passing, to this claim. She first suggests that Barthes's injunction about the death of the author is yet another example of the radical idiom of critique, picturing 'the reader as a rebellious iconoclast and outlaw'.⁴⁸ Second, and perhaps more implicitly, she contends that

structuralist and poststructuralist theories that stressed the formative power of language [...] repudiat[ed] any form of author-centered criticism as the last gasp of a discredited humanism. As a result, the role of the individual [...] is frequently minimized or denied.⁴⁹

This observation is more an intuition serving Felski's polemics with poststructuralism than a step towards adding a new element to her postcritique. This section aims to elaborate on it, in view of introducing the figure of the author to the postcritical–postcolonial interpretive scene.

In 'What Is an Author?' (1969), Foucault reaches a conclusion similar to Barthes via a more elaborate route. Against those who 'repeat the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared'⁵⁰ – the allusion to Barthes cannot be missed⁵¹ – Foucault begins by detecting the sites where the author re-emerges. He is interested not so much in recovering authorship per se as he is in understanding how the functions connected to it survive at the time of its alleged death. Foucault thus focuses on the author-function, that is, on how the author's proper name endows unity, marks ownership, and grants authority even when anonymity and writing (*écriture*) are held to be primary. This function is not immutable across time and space: Foucault figures it as a historical formation, thereby arguing that it will disappear as time passes and society changes.⁵²

Foucault's auspice for the author-function to dissolve is premised on two concerns. First, authorship shares the same faith as 'man' for him. As literary theorist Seán Burke points out, the theorization of the author mirrors the death of man that Foucault announced three years earlier in *The Order of Things*.⁵³ 'Man', for Foucault, is one of the conditions of modern knowledge or 'episteme', and it will disappear just like the author when the current episteme is over. 'Man' and 'author' are not reducible to one another, but 'that [their] destinies [...] are entwined [...] is incontestable'.⁵⁴ The second concern underlying Foucault's prognosis about the author's death has to do with the 'ideological' status of authorship:

How can one reduce the great peril, the great danger with which fiction threatens our world? The answer is: one can reduce it with the author. [...] The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning.⁵⁵

For Foucault, common sense holds that the author is the creative and unlimited source of meaning, but, in practice, it functions to constrain meaning (it is 'ideological' in this sense). To be sure, Foucault does not advocate for a culture where fictional texts are unbound, yet he does expect future constraints to replace the author-function. Interestingly, he conceives of fiction as potentially 'perilous' because of the very conception of literature he developed in his early works. As Dieter Freundlieb argues, the young Foucault understands literature, after the modernist example and his own fascination with madness, as that which transgresses the boundaries of normality and gives central stage to *écriture* while pushing the author to the background. 'What Foucault admired in such writers as Hölderlin, Nerval, Artaud, Blanchot, Bataille, and Roussel', writes Freundlieb, 'was that their language could give us at least some, if only momentary, access to the silenced truth of pure, tragic madness'.⁵⁶ A number of questions can be put to Foucault's understanding of literature and the author. Via Said, I will formulate one.

The influence of Foucault on Said cannot be overstated. The notion of Orientalism, for instance, can only be understood with reference to Foucault's theorizing, as it describes a

system of knowledge that acts concomitantly as a disciplinary device, a tool of control, and a limit to what can and cannot be said about the Orient.⁵⁷ But, Said also carries out a thorough revision of Foucault.⁵⁸ *Beginnings* (1975), a work that sets out the basis of Said's literary criticism, is partly conceived in response to 'What is an Author?'⁵⁹ In it, Said takes issue with what he sees as Foucault's excessive focus on language, constricting all human activities under its sign: 'In achieving a position of mastery over man, language has reduced him to a [...] function'.⁶⁰ Authorship follows a similar logic: because Foucault understands it only in terms of function, he disregards its empirical and personal dimensions. For Said, on the contrary, such elements as human will and biographical facts *do* matter. The underlying argument of *Beginnings*, as Nicolas Vandeviver's study on Said suggests, is that the dissolution of the author carried out by Foucault corresponds to the move from the classical to the modernist novel. 'The quintessential modernist author-novelist', says Vandeviver, 'takes up an authorial position in which he or she comes to embody Foucault's author-function'.⁶¹ What conception of the author would thus emerge from a different understanding of literature – one that is *not* modelled on European modernism? In our postcolonial context, the literary critic cannot limit themselves to the Western canon, Spivak reminds us. By exploring non-European literary works, different pictures and even functions of the author may emerge. Through the figure of 'late style' in Coetzee's novel *The Childhood of Jesus*, the next section provides one example in which the author, instead of restricting meaning, as Foucault would hold, is the deliberate source of its proliferation.

Said's focus on authorship is not meant to reduce a text to the author's intentions or biography. The act of writing, for Said, cannot but exist in the 'tension between invention and restraint',⁶² that is, between individual creativity and the limits set by society. This results most clearly from his understanding of the author in *Orientalism* (1978). 'Unlike Foucault', Said 'believe[s] in the determining imprinting of individual writers',⁶³ but the larger circumstances cannot be ignored. Neither does Said restore the romantic idea of the author as genius, nor does he equate writing with the materialization of ideological structures. For him, to merely see an orientalist work as 'biased' misses the creative force and brilliancy of the author. Orientalists, for instance, were not only conscious of the fact of Empire but also enabled by it. Concomitantly, to see a work as the mere product of an exceptional mind misses the circumstances of its production. This is what Said calls the 'dynamic exchange between individual authors and [...] political concerns'.⁶⁴ A similar point is elaborated in the introduction of Said's later *Culture and Imperialism* (1993):

My method is to focus as much as possible on individual works, to read them first as great products of the creative or interpretative imagination, and then to show them as part of the relationship between culture and empire. I do not believe that authors are mechanically determined by ideology, class, or economic history, but authors are, I also believe, very much in the histories of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history [...].⁶⁵

Here, again, Said carves a place in literary criticism for the author as the not-quite-fully determined vehicle of culture. Cultural objects, 'the best' that a society has produced, emerge precisely at the crossroads of the 'creative or interpretative imagination' of individual writers and 'the histories of their societies'.

I suggest that the recovery of authorship, particularly in the version provided by Said, is a postcolonial gesture that can supplement the postcritical project. It brings context to the fore without reducing it to broad social categories or structures – something postcritical cautions against – but by locating it in the interplay between the individual and the collective – between human will and biographical facts on the one hand, and historical-political contexts on the other. In the next section, by way of J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*, an example is provided of how a focus on the author can account for the aesthetic elements of a text without doing away with contexts.

Coetzee's 'late style' in *The Childhood of Jesus*

The Childhood of Jesus (2013), the first novel of a trilogy that J. M. Coetzee has concluded only recently, tells the story of an exceptionally gifted and stubborn boy, David, and of the adult taking care of him, Simón.⁶⁶ The two arrive as refugees in the dystopian city of Novilla, a place where pleasures seem not to be part of people's lives, all basic needs are fulfilled by the state, and bureaucracy is as Kafkaian as passions are scarce. There, Simón builds a new life for the boy and himself, waiting for the day when David's mother will show up. Eventually, he finds Inés, whom he appoints as mother. Well-off Inés, initially reluctant to assume her new role, ends up being overprotective and indulgent towards David, increasingly distancing him from Simón. Yet, the latter remains present in David's life, becoming his problem solver and joining him and his mother when the two decide to escape Novilla, as they find its education system unsuited to the boy, and move to Estrella.

Not only is the novel extremely linear, as this inevitably short summary shows, but it is also written in a simple and unadorned vocabulary. The reader has the impression of learning the language of Novilla (which is said to be Spanish, although the story is narrated in English) at the same time and pace as the two protagonists. Yet, despite its apparent clarity, *The Childhood of Jesus* remains largely inscrutable. Because of the novel's many themes, symbols, and allusions – and not least because it is written by one of today's most prominent writers – interpretations span from the postcolonial to the theological and the metaphysical.⁶⁷

The tropes of migration and otherness, particularly appealing to postcolonial critics, are often emphasized. J. U. Jacobs argues that the novel articulates a vision of the migrant subject as a precarious bridge between home (the unnamed place where the protagonists conducted their previous life) and the host city (Novilla).⁶⁸ Alexander Honold, on his part, interprets the novel as an instantiation of three dimensions of otherness: not only that of the migrant but also that of the child, David, and that of the act of writing itself.⁶⁹ Drawing on Coetzee's previous fictional and non-fictional works, as well as on his background as the descendant of European settlers, Spivak complicates the postcolonial account of *The Childhood of Jesus* beyond the symbolism of diaspora and otherness. For her, Coetzee is 'a creative writer of theory'⁷⁰ who, by disseminating signs, instructs us on how to read. In many of his works, Spivak argues, Coetzee never ceases to stage the white creole's attachment to land in the postcolonial nation, and this novel makes no exception. According to Spivak, Novilla, as the city of people who forgot their past and are cleared of memory, stands for the barren South African scape – the Karoo – of Coetzee's childhood. Although the author-Coetzee cannot own or regain this land, he tries to grasp it through

words. In Spivak's phrasing, '[l]iterature is not evidence. It is [...] [a]n attempt to earn the right to lie down in the Karoo left behind'.⁷¹

Spivak's reading makes room for the author-Coetzee to enter the interpretive scene. For her, Coetzee is the name, not just for the unifying principle of an oeuvre, but for the writer who attempts to come to terms with both his past and the politics of his time. Postcritic Elizabeth S. Anker, on the other hand, provides a different, thought-provoking understanding of the novel, starting from Spivak's definition of Coetzee as a creative writer of theory. She writes:

There is little doubt that the many thought experiments unfolded in Coetzee's novels both conduct a form of theory and prompt its application. [...] But an observation like Spivak's nonetheless begs the questions: what modes and styles of theory does Coetzee elicit? What theoretical paradigms are rewarded in his writing?⁷²

Anker's answer, not unexpectedly, is that Coetzee's works elicit interpretations in line with the protocols of critique. However, *The Childhood of Jesus*, instead of confirming the need for a critical approach to Coetzee's texts, troubles its usefulness. In fact, for Anker, critique aims to decipher recondite meanings; but, in so doing, it performs a form of divertissement ('the funhouse of critique', as the title of her essay reads) rather than a real interpretive work. This novel, in Anker's view, includes so many symbols that the critical reader ends up being at a loss of interpretations. As a result, *The Childhood of Jesus* is, for her, an allegory of the very impossibility of ever deciphering all the meanings of a text – that is, of the impossibility of critique.⁷³

An ironic short circuit takes place: Anker, whose postcritical approach refuses all allegorical readings, interprets the novel as an allegory of the limits of allegories, that is, as an allegory of postcritique.⁷⁴ More than staging a contradiction, this move seems to postulate the same 'level of self-consciousness' between the text and the critic that postcritique aims to counter. In fact, when commenting on postcolonial critics, Anker and Felski argue that these are usually drawn 'to texts that exhibit levels of self-consciousness mirroring their own': '[w]ithin postcolonial studies [...], critics were often enthralled with texts that "wrote back" to empire, foregrounding their own compromised position within literary history while subverting the ideological biases of their literary forebears'.⁷⁵ In other words, postcolonial critics are purported to restrict their focus on works that share their same intellectual agenda. This may well be true, but is Anker's reading of Coetzee not bound to the same logic? To what extent does an interpretation of *The Childhood of Jesus* as a marker of the impossibility of critique *not* mirror the postcritical consciousness?

As a way to take both the profusion of allegories and Coetzee's capacity as a 'creative writer of theory' into account without rushing to turn the novel into a new piece of the postcritical puzzle, I suggest turning to Yoshiki Tajiri's interpretation, which brings authorship to the surface. Similar to Anker, Tajiri not only recognizes the text's many allusions – to the Gospels, to Kafka, to Don Quixote, to scatology – but he also refuses to decode them. The novel for him is a pastiche: an extravagant combination of themes that appeared in Coetzee's previous works, which are here assembled to give 'a sense that literature has reached a saturation point'.⁷⁶ Tajiri's definition of *The Childhood of Jesus* as a 'literary theme park', in fact, resembles Anker's 'funhouse of critique'. Yet, the novel's eclecticism, according to Tajiri, is not proof of the limits of criticism but

the product of the author's 'late style'. This phrase, borrowed from Said's posthumous *On Late Style* (2006) and already deployed by Julian Murphet to describe Coetzee's recent literary production, refers to a writing style that reflects the author's proximity to death. According to Said, far from solving the quandaries they have always been busy with, some late writers stage the unresolved contradictions and questions underpinning their oeuvre.⁷⁷ For Tajiri, *The Childhood of Jesus* is one such instance of stylistic lateness: it may not share the linguistic intransigence and obscurity that Said detects in late works, but it does display the 'self-quotation and mannerism'⁷⁸ typical of them.

By means of a gesture that draws aesthetics and embodiment together, Tajiri connects the proliferation of allegories in the novel to a late moment in Coetzee's literary production, and, in so doing, he does justice to the author's own definition of stylistic lateness. Coetzee himself, in an epistolary exchange with Paul Auster, who encourages him to comment on Said's *On Late Style*, states: 'In the case of literature, late style, to me, starts with an ideal of a simple, subdued, unornamented language and a concentration on questions of real import, even questions of life and death'.⁷⁹ The simplicity of language and the staging of philosophical quandaries are precisely two features of *The Childhood of Jesus*. One such question in the novel concerns death. 'What are dead bodies?', David asks Simón while the latter is clearing a blocked drain. The dialogue that follows is an example, not only of Coetzee's choice of deploying a colloquial register to discuss death, but also of his refusal to have a final say on a subject of this magnitude:

'Dead bodies are bodies that have been afflicted with death, that we no longer have a use for. But we don't have to be troubled by death. [...] We human beings are fortunate in that respect. We are not like poo, that has to stay behind and be mixed again with the earth'.

'What are we like?'

'[...] We are like ideas. Ideas never die. You will learn that at school'.

'But we make poo'.

'That is true. We partake of the ideal but we also make poo. That is because we have a double nature. I don't know how to put it more simply'.

The boy is silent. *Let him chew on that*, he thinks. He kneels down beside the toilet bowl, rolls his sleeve up as high as it will go. [...] The water, in which clots of Inés's poo still float, closes over his hand, his wrist, his forearm. [...] He does not feel like a being with a double nature. He feels like a man fishing for an obstruction in a sewage pipe, using primitive tools.⁸⁰

Conclusion

The encounter between postcritique and postcolonial criticism has shown both the convergences and the frictions between the two. One point of convergence is their common dissatisfaction with ready-made frameworks serving the easy equation between academic criticism and social-political commitment. One point of friction is that, while postcritique tends to do away with all predetermined frameworks, postcolonial criticism cannot overlook the contexts in which cultural objects are produced. This results most clearly in postcritique's eschewal of the cultural dimension of critique. In fact, when understanding the latter either as a style and 'ethos' or as part of a philosophical tradition,

postcritique misses the entanglement of critique with the realm of culture. If the postcritical project is seriously committed to rethinking literary criticism, then it should provide an alternative account of the state of culture – or, at least, it should offer a strategy in order not to fall back into the universalistic tendency that a focus on aesthetics is at risk of.

In order to account for the particularizing elements of culture while doing justice to postcritique's refusal of too grand narratives, I propose to turn attention to the figure of the author. The latter is not only a function, as in Foucault's conceptualization, but, following Said, also an embodied figure whose will and biography matter as much as the contexts in which they are embedded. Authorship thus conceived can help bridge the historical-political vicissitudes and the details of everyday life. A case in point is J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*. This novel is a commentary on the postcolonial condition of its author as a white creole, as Spivak contends, but its literary exuberance also points at other stylistic choices and biographical facts of Coetzee's. As Tajiri suggests, *The Childhood of Jesus* can in fact be read as an instance of Coetzee's late style, that is, of the willingness of its author to stage some unresolved problems without providing any ultimate answer.

Notes

1. Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015; Elizabeth S Anker and Rita Felski (eds), *Critique and Postcritique*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.
2. See Bruce Robbins, 'Fashion Conscious Phenomenon', *American Book Review* 38(5), 2017, pp 5–6.
3. I borrow this insight from Mercedes Bunz, Birgit Kaiser and Kathrin Thiele, 'Introduction', in M Bunz, B Kaiser and K Thiele (eds), *Symptoms of the Planetary Condition: A Critical Vocabulary*, Lüneburg: meson press, 2017, pp 7–17.
4. For the references, see note 1. Let me point out the recent international success of postcritique: Mariano Croce, *Postcritica. Asignificanza, Materia, Affetti*, Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019; Laurent de Sutter (ed), *Postcritique*, Paris: PUF, 2019.
5. The phrase 'masters of suspicion' was coined by Paul Ricoeur in his *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970, p 33). For similar discontents with 'critique' or 'Theory' from within literary studies, see: Daphne Patai and Will H Corral, *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005; Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations* 108(3), 2009, pp 1–21.
6. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 2. Italics in the original.
7. Elizabeth S Anker and Rita Felski, 'Introduction', in Anker and Felski (eds), *Critique and Postcritique*, pp 1–25, p 3.
8. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp 172–185.
9. On Sedgwick's influence on Felski, see: Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp 34–35, 151–152; Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature*, Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2008, p 3. On Latour's, see: Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp 152, 157–158; Rita Felski, 'Latour and Literary Studies', *PMLA* 130(3), 2015, pp. 737–742. On the genealogy of Felski's proposal, see note 4 of the introduction of *The Limits of Critique*, p 195.
10. Eve K Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is about You', in E K Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003, pp 123–152.
11. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 35.

12. Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry* 30, 2004, pp 225–248.
13. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p 144.
14. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 158.
15. Joseph North, *Literary Criticism. A Concise Political History*, London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. North draws a distinction between literary criticism as a scholarly enterprise (one that has been successful in imposing a historical/contextualist paradigm of analysis) and literary criticism as an aesthetic/pedagogical enterprise (one that dates back to the first half of the twentieth century and treats 'the study of literature as an opportunity [to] intervene in culture' [p 2]). Similar to Felski's depiction of critique, he understands scholarly criticism as a shortcut for political commitment. Contrary to it, he does not question critique: he rather explores the current alternatives to the mandate to 'always historicise!' in line with the original (aesthetic) character of literary criticism.
16. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 143.
17. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp 140–147. For a discussion of the politics of postcritique, see my 'Teorie e politiche della postcritica. Note su un dibattito transdisciplinare', *Filosofia Politica* 2, 2020, pp 337–348.
18. Gayatri C Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in C Nelson and L Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp 271–313, 275–280.
19. Felski (*The Limits of Critique*, p 77) defines postcolonial studies as a 'supplement or surrogate of poststructuralism'.
20. Elizabeth S Anker, 'Why We Love Coetzee: Or, *The Childhood of Jesus* and the Funhouse of Critique', in Anker and Felski (eds), *Critique and Postcritique*, pp 183–208, p 195.
21. Gayatri C Spivak, 'Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's Foe Reading Defoe's "Crusoe/Roxana"', *English in Africa* 17(2), 1990, pp 1–23, p 16.
22. Gayatri C Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, pp 1–24.
23. See Johan Faerber, 'Pour une après-critique', in de Sutter (ed), *Postcritique*, 163–207; Natascia Tosel, 'Tra le spire del serpente: il tradimento della postcritica', *Politica & Società* 3, 2018, pp 419–430.
24. When describing the critic who demystifies her object of study not by 'digging down' (as in Freud) but by 'standing back', Felski writes: 'In standing back from the text, she also stands over it, looking down with a puzzled or ironic gaze [...]. Weaned on Foucault, she looks skeptically at a Freudian language of repression and symptoms. Instead of reading deep, she prefers to reads [sic] wide, swapping the close-up view of the microscope for a wide-angle lens that offers a panoramic view of systems of discourse and grids of power' (Felski, *The limits of Critique*, p 70).
25. On the similarities between Foucault and the postcritical project, compare Lorenzo Bernini, 'Foucault tra critica e postcritica. Le iene nella sauna e il sesso anonimo tra maschi', *Politica & Società* 2, 2018, pp 191–214.
26. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp 4, 6, 26; Anker and Felski, 'Introduction', p 3.
27. Felski, *The limits of Critique*, pp 40–41.
28. Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', in P Rabinow (ed), *The Foucault Reader*, New York: Pantheon, 1984, pp 32–50, p 42.
29. Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', p 35.
30. Felski, *The limits of Critique*, p 12.
31. Warner states: 'critical reading is the folk ideology of a learned profession, so close to us that we seldom feel the need to explain it' (Michael Warner, 'Uncritical Reading', in J Gallop (ed), *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical?*, New York and London: Routledge, pp 13–38, p 14).
32. Warner, 'Uncritical Reading', p 25.
33. Warner, 'Uncritical Reading', p 24.
34. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, p 47.

35. Williams, *Keywords*, p 48. Italics in the original.
36. Stuart Hall, 'Marx's Notes on Method: A "Reading" of the "1857 Introduction"', *Cultural Studies* 17(2), 2003, pp 113–149, p 131.
37. Edward W Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Vintage, 1994, p xiii.
38. Williams, *Keywords*, p 54.
39. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950*, New York: Anchor Books, p xvi.
40. Bruce Robbins, *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture*, London: Verso, 1993, p 61.
41. Robbins, *Secular Vocations*, p 60. Italics in the original.
42. According to Felski, postcritique should move beyond critique's commitment to 'denaturalise' objects that are 'socially constructed'. An example of such a critical mode is Judith Butler's work, which argues that gender and sex are not natural facts to which cultural practices are superimposed but discursive effects informed by culture from the start. Even though Felski acknowledges that such language of denaturalization has been an important tool for marginal social groups to counter the *status quo*, it has now become a typical and unproductive trope of critique (Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp 77–82).
43. Anker and Felski, 'Introduction', pp 18–21; Felski, *Uses of Literature*, pp 1–2.
44. Anker and Felski, 'Introduction', p 20.
45. For a reading that underscores convergences and divergences between Felski's project, post-humanism (the acknowledgement of the current crisis of the humanities), and the post-literary (a prognosis about the end of literature), see: Marc Farrant, 'Literary Endgames: The Post-Literary, Postcritique, and the Death of/in Contemporary Literature', *Critique* 61(2), 2020, pp 144–156.
46. Robbins, 'Fashion Conscious Phenomenon', p 6. See also his 'Critical Correctness: Some literary scholars would like to escape politics. But is that even possible?', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 12 March 2019, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/critical-correctness/> (accessed 17 February 2020).
47. Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in R Barthes, *Image Music Text*, London: Fontana Press, 1977, pp 142–148, p 146.
48. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 109.
49. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p 94.
50. Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in P Rabinow (ed), *The Foucault Reader*, pp 101–120, p 105.
51. For the implicit reference to Barthes in Foucault's essay, see: Andrew Bennett, *The Author*, New York: Routledge, 2005, pp 19–21.
52. Foucault, 'What is an Author?', p 119.
53. Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author. Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (third edition), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008. See in particular pp 60–111.
54. Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*, p 102.
55. Foucault, 'What is an Author?', pp 118–119.
56. Dieter Freundlieb, 'Foucault and the Study of Literature', *Poetics Today* 16(2), 1995, pp 301–344, p 306.
57. Cf. Edward W Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, p 3.
58. See Paul A Bové's extensive discussion of Said's relation with Foucault in his *Intellectuals in Power. A Genealogy of Critical Humanism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996 (particularly pp 209–238).
59. Edward W Said, *Beginnings. Intention and Method*, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978 (particularly pp 277–315). On the connection between this text and Foucault's 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?', see Nicolas Vandeviver, *Edward Said and the Authority of Literary Criticism*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p 222.
60. Said, *Beginnings*, p 288.
61. Vandeviver, *Edward Said*, p 234.
62. Vandeviver, *Edward Said*, p 230.

63. Said, *Orientalism*, p 23.
64. Said, *Orientalism*, pp 14–15.
65. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p xxvii.
66. J M Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, London: Harvill Secker, 2013. The other two books of the trilogy are: J M Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2016; and J M Coetzee, *The Death of Jesus*, London: Harvill Secker, 2019.
67. Anthony Uhlmann and Jennifer Rutherford suggest that ‘it is possible to read [David’s and Simón’s] new life in Novilla as an exploration of the migrant experience and an exploration of an imagined afterlife’ (Anthony Uhlmann and Jennifer Rutherford (eds), *J. M. Coetzee’s The Childhood of Jesus: The Ethics of Ideas and Things*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, p 3).
68. J U Jacobs, ‘A Bridging Fiction: The Migrant Subject in J.M. Coetzee’s *The Childhood of Jesus*’, *Journal of Literary Studies* 33(1), 2017, pp 59–75, p 62.
69. Alexander Honold, ‘The Reading of Don Quixote: Literature’s Migration into a New World’, in T Mehigan and C Moser (eds), *The Intellectual Landscape in the Works of J. M. Coetzee*, Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer, 2018, pp 189–210.
70. Gayatri C Spivak, ‘Lie Down in the Karoo: An Antidote to the Anthropocene’, *Public Books*, 6 January 2014, <https://www.publicbooks.org/lie-down-in-the-karoo-an-antidote-to-the-anthropocene/> (accessed 27 January 2020), np.
71. Spivak, ‘Lie Down in the Karoo’, np.
72. Anker, ‘Why We Love Coetzee’, pp 183–184.
73. Anker, ‘Why We Love Coetzee’, p 193. Although not referenced, Anker’s reading is similar to Julian Murphet’s argument about Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man*, and *Diary of a Bad Year*: all these novels are ‘allegories of [...] their own failure to amount to allegories’ (Julian Murphet, ‘Coetzee and Late Style: Exile within the Form’, *Twentieth Century Literature* 57(1), 2011, pp 86–104, p 90).
74. About postcritique’s refusal of allegorical readings, see: Anker and Felski, ‘Introduction’, pp 6–8.
75. Anker and Felski, ‘Introduction’, p 9.
76. Yoshiki Tajiri, ‘Beyond the Literary Theme Park: J. M. Coetzee’s Late Style in *The Childhood of Jesus*’, *Journal of Modern Literature* 39(2), 2016, pp 72–88, p 76.
77. Edward W Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain*, New York: Pantheon Books, 2006. On Murphet, see note 73.
78. Tajiri, ‘Beyond the Literary Theme Park’, p 80.
79. J M Coetzee and Paul Auster, *Here and Now: Letters 2008–2011*, New York: Viking, p 97.
80. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, pp 157–158.

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